

CULTURAL FACTORS

National cultural factors associated with processes of
radicalisation leading to terrorism

Joaquim Pires Valentim
Ana Figueiredo
Joana Duarte
University of Coimbra
Dianne van Hemert
TNO, The Netherlands
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INTRODUCTION

This document presents a synthesis of the work developed in SAFIRE on the cultural and national factors associated with processes of radicalisation leading to terrorist violence.

Pervasive cultural viewpoints cut across different types of violent extremism in Europe and are of major importance when trying to understand the phenomena of violent radicalisation. Therefore, it seems reasonable that, if we want to improve the understanding of processes of violent radicalisation that lead to terrorism, we must take into account these cultural issues.

Drawing from an extensive literature review, we found evidence for links between several cultural variables and violent radicalisation and terrorism.

We aggregated the indicators that appeared from our review into three main categories:

1. socio-demographic and economic: namely poverty and inequality, modernisation, socio-economic and demographic changes, education and urbanization;
2. political and institutional: namely political systems, political participation, welfare policies, political transformation and instability;
3. psychosocial and cultural indicators: such as ethnic heterogeneity, Hofstede's cultural values, temporal contagion effect (meaning that past terrorism foments new terrorism within one country), and social facilitation in the sense of historical antecedents of political violence.

The first, and perhaps the main finding from this literature review is that this phenomenon is too complex to be reduced only to one root condition. Also, the fact that most of the evidence presented is contradictory points even further to the complexity of the phenomenon. Therefore, it is very clear that non-

linear approaches would be more suitable for the study of terrorism.

According to our literature review, terrorism is most likely to emerge in highly populated, non-democratic and instable countries. However, there is not much evidence indicating that poor economic conditions alone lead to terrorism. In this sense, the importance of economic order in the emergence of terrorism seems to be surpassed by political and institutional factors.

There is also an indication that countries with historical antecedents of political violence, a lack of political participation, excessive repression by state authorities, instability (political, economic and social) and uncertainty avoidance (in the sense of Hofstede's cultural values) may be more at risk of terrorism.

We subsequently conducted an analysis of existent empirical data on cultural variables found to be associated with violent radicalisation and terrorism. This cultural analysis is focused on the national level. We are aware that this categorisation is an artefact, because cultures are not limited to countries' borders, nor are homogeneous inside these borders, and also in the sense that we risk falling into the trap of considering the all-moulding power of culture inside each nation. However, considering culture at the national level of analysis is an important research tool that provides us with an operational way of dealing with our topic. For the purposes of the present work we used the concept of 'national culture' strictly in the very operational sense of available empirical data (e.g., on socio-economic, political or cultural indicators) about a specific country.

The indicators selected describe any European country that can be considered a target of violent radicalisation and domestic or international terrorism. Therefore, in this part of our work, we cover the 'target country' perspective, whereas in the first part of our work (literature review) we focused on the 'host country' perspective or country of origin perspective. With this procedure we admit that the effect of culture is not clear-cut and straightforward in processes of violent radicalisation leading to terrorism, which may have a global perspective.



METHOD

A search was done to find European country-level variables and statistics that cover most of the factors found in the literature review. Furthermore, we also searched for other cultural variables, which could be important to understand violent radicalisation and terrorism, but which were not found in the literature review. The variables and statistics were examined in order to explore the association of national culture with processes of violent radicalisation. For these analyses we employed different European databases, such as the European Social Survey and other open source databases with data relevant to our analysis. In this analysis we used the previous aggregation of variables in three main categories (socio-demographic and economic; political and institutional; psychosocial and cultural).

VARIABLES

For the present analysis, 48 variables were selected from the existent open-access databases used to create our work database. All variables refer to the country level and they had to be available for at least 10 European countries to be included in our analysis.

- 1) Socio-demographic and economic factors
Socio-demographic and economic factors pertain to characteristics of each country, which are mainly related to wealth and the composition of the country's population.
- 2) Political and institutional factors
Variables included in this category refer to the specificities of each country in regards to the way its political system and institutions are organized.
- 3) Psychosocial and cultural factors
These variables are not psychological characteristics of individuals, but rather are composite measures of psychosocial and cultural characteristics and tendencies at the country level
- 4) Potential radicalisation
To assess potential radicalisation, we used different indicators that might be associated with polarized attitudes towards different social objects, such as attitudes towards multiculturalism and immigrants. We must note that these indicators are not, per se, measures of radicalisation. They are better conceptualized as variables that may reflect radical attitudes, which can lead (or not) to violent radical behaviour.

- 5) Indicators of violent radical behaviour
We searched for indicators of terrorism (for example, the 'Global Terrorism Indicator') in open source databases as one of the measurable components of violent radical behaviour, so we could assess the degree to which these indicators are associated with the variables included in our dataset.

DATA ANALYSIS

Correlations were calculated across all selected variables. In order to avoid capitalisation on chance, we focused on patterns of strong correlations rather than on single significant correlations.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Most of the variables associated with violent radical behaviour belong to the socio-demographic and economic category. Variables related to wealth (such as GDP, and income inequality) seem to play an important role in predicting possible radicalisation leading to violent radical behaviour. Furthermore, variables included in the category of political and institutional factors (such as state instability and integration policies) are associated with indicators of potential radicalisation (such as multiculturalism, and attitudes towards immigrants) and several other variables belonging to the psychosocial and cultural category.

Our results point to the predominance of socioeconomic and political variables (such as GDP and unemployment) associated with terrorism. More concretely, we find consistent evidence for the importance of people's political participation and trust in authorities (national and European parliament, legal system, police, political parties, United Nations), because they are negatively associated with our indicators of terrorism (such as the Global Terrorism Indicator, which measures the number of deaths caused by terrorist events).

We must bear in mind some limitations of our research. Firstly, a cultural analysis should not be insensitive to the subcultures in a more anthropological sense, as well as in a specific sense of organisational culture of groups and organisations involved in violent radicalisation processes and actions.



Secondly, there is another important dimension of cultural factors in radicalisation processes not covered in our analysis: a group process dimension. Group process phenomena are very relevant for radicalisation. Furthermore, a group is never alone in society. Instead, intra-group processes are deeply linked with intergroup relations. Actually, relations between different extremist groups could lead to more radicalisation or antagonism under certain conditions or to de-radicalisation under others.

Concluding, we must bear in mind that, in isolation, cultural variables can hardly be responsible for violent radicalisation and terrorism. These processes are too complex and diverse to be attributable to single causes. Nevertheless, national cultures can be a fertile ground for these phenomena to emerge, when other specific political and economic factors are also present. Exactly how these different factors interact and strengthen or weaken each other is difficult to deduce from the theoretical and empirical data that are available at the moment. It seems feasible that, because of the relative constant nature of cultural factors, cultural factors would be less relevant when explaining sudden changes in radicalisation in European countries.

Finally, we must also draw attention to the fact that the cultural factors analysed here are 'pre-existing conditions' in society and they characterise several aspects of a country's level of organization and social order. These cultural factors can only be considered background factors that may influence processes of violent radicalisation and terrorism when other more relevant factors are present.